

Talking about *Gulliver's Travels*

by Jonathan Swift · the free ebook lives at youngreaderguide.org/books/gullivers-travels/

Warming up

Easy openers. Anyone at the table can answer these, including the youngest.

1. You wake up somewhere and everyone is six inches tall. First thing you do?
2. Now the other way round: everyone is sixty feet tall and you are the small one. Is that better or worse, and why?
3. Lilliput and Blefuscu have been at war for years over which end of a boiled egg you are supposed to break. What is the silliest thing you have ever seen two people genuinely fall out about?

The real conversation

Pick two or three, not all of them. Parents answer too, honestly.

1. The Lilliputians search Gulliver's pockets and write down what they find, but they have to describe a pocket watch without knowing what one is — 'a wonderful kind of engine' that he calls his oracle and consults before doing anything. Pick something out of a pocket or a drawer right now and describe it that way, as if you had never seen one. What does the thing sound like when you have to say what it does instead of what it is?
2. In Brobdingnag the King listens to Gulliver describe England — the parliament, the courts, the wars — and concludes that his people must be 'the most pernicious race of little odious vermin' that ever crawled on the earth. Gulliver is offended. Was the King being unfair, or was he only repeating back what he had just been told?
3. Gulliver offers the King the secret of gunpowder, thinking it a generous gift, and the King is horrified and forbids him ever to mention it again. Gulliver thinks the King is being narrow-minded. Who was right? Is there anything you would refuse to be told how to make?
4. Gulliver spends a page thrilled that the Struldbrugs can never die, planning everything he would do with the time — and then finds out what living forever actually does to a person. Why is his first reaction so different from the truth? What else do people want badly without picturing what it would actually be like?
5. By the end Gulliver would rather talk to his horses than to his own family, and he thinks he is the only sane one in the house. Everyone else thinks he has lost his mind. Is it possible to be right about something and still be the one with the problem?

The big *one*

Save it for last.

Every country Gulliver visits looks ridiculous to him, and he never once notices that he looks ridiculous to them — the giants laugh at his tiny sword, the horses cannot tell him apart from a Yahoo. If somebody from one of those places spent a week at this table watching us, what is the first thing they would find completely absurd about how we live?

Do it *together*

Write the fifth voyage. Swift's method is simple enough to copy: take one thing your family or your town actually does, make it the law of the land, and then let a polite traveller describe it with a straight face. Pick something small and real — how people queue, what happens at a birthday party, the rules about shoes in the house, who gets the front seat. Give the country a name that sounds like it was transcribed off a stranger's tongue. Then each person writes one page as Gulliver: 'The inhabitants of ——— are a courteous people, though I confess I could never learn the reason why...' Read them out loud in the same flat, reasonable voice Gulliver uses. Whoever's country the rest of the table recognises first, wins.